



2012 Margaret Edwards acceptance speech

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Once upon a time there were two actors named Hume Cronyn and Jessica Tandy, who acted all through their long lives, and when they were a few years older than I am now, they were given a special Tony Award for Lifetime Achievement. We were friends, so I called them up, to say Congratulations. It was Jessie who picked up the phone. “Oh yes, darling,” she said, “isn’t it nice of them? It’s a prize for the fact that we’re still vertical.”

But we’re book people, you and I, and the Margaret Edwards Award is about the survival not of a person but of a book. Five books, in my case. The *Dark Is Rising* sequence and I are deeply grateful for this award, and I’m delighted to be here, amongst so many of my mates (as we say where I come from). This is my peer group, my family, my comfort in time of trouble – in spite of the fact that I’ve never really come to grips with the term Young Adult.

When I was growing up, I was never conscious of a YA category: there was simply this overlap period after you were about 13, when you’d be taking books out of the adult as well as the

children's library. As a writer, I think my imagination lives in that overlap. And judging by the letters I've had over the years, these books are read by children, adolescents, young adults – the whole lot. As Maurice Sendak used to say: "I write the books – other people tell me who they're for."

Writing a story is a kind of magic. I'm not talking about fantasy, even though these particular books are fantasies, and came out of a head soaked in myth and Arthurian legend. I mean the extraordinary magical act of inventing another place, whether it's on Mars or in the town next door. Going inside it, living there in your head, while you're writing the story. In *The Dark Is Rising*, yes, I did want to tell a story about a boy who wakes up on his 11th birthday and finds he is utterly changed – but I had an unconscious motive too, I was magicking myself into a certain place. I wanted, for a while, to go home.

It was 1970, and I'd been living in the United States for 7 years. I was about 35, I had two small American children, and I certainly didn't want to move, but I was homesick just the same. The kind of homesickness that the Welsh call *hiraeth*, longing. So I answered my longing in the book, by putting my hero Will Stanton into my childhood; into the countryside of Buckinghamshire in which I'd grown up.

Every inch of the book was home. At nine years old I used to ride my bike down the road that passed Will's family's house; this was actually the local vicarage, in which, later on, the vicar's wife

tutored me in Latin, my unfavorite subject. I rode past the local Manor House, where in my story the mythic character Miss Greythorne would live. I rode to the ominous wood full of shrieking rooks, and the small ancient church of St James the Less, where the Dark would confront the Light. That church had been there since the 12th century – and it's still there, though now it shares a vicar with three other churches, and there's a giant motorway cutting across the nearby fields.

Closer to the village that I called Huntercombe, whose real name is Dorney, was the farm that belongs in the book to Farmer Dawson, one of the Old Ones. In the real world, it was a farm where I had a summer job one year, picking raspberries, sweating a lot and earning very little. And the farmer whom I turned into an immortal creature 20 years later, almost certainly wasn't.

In one respect, reality has caught up with this book's fiction. Beyond that little church is a wide green stretch of land called Dorney Common, and in *The Dark Is Rising* the Dark sends a great roaring flood across it, attacking the Light. Today, guess what, a large chunk of the common has been flooded, to make an artificial lake. It's going to be the site of another conflict – the crew races in next month's Olympic Games. I guess the identities of the Dark and the Light will depend upon where you come from.

I went home in the later books of the *Dark Is Rising* sequence too, to my other magical childhood places, Cornwall and North Wales. My grandmother was born in the Welsh village of Aberdyfi, at

the mouth of the River Dyfi, below the mountain Cader Idris, which means in English “the Seat of Arthur.” The village was full of family, and my parents moved there for good when I was 18.

I must have been about eight, in Aberdyfi, when my Welsh uncle Llew told me about the Brenin Llwyd, the Grey King. All the valleys around Cader Idris were under the power of the Brenin Llwyd, said Uncle Llew gravely, in his deep musical Welsh voice. When the mist came blowing off the summit of Cader, he said, you had to beware, because that was the breath of the Grey King reaching out for you.

So this was the place in which I lived, in my head, while I was writing the fourth of the *Dark Is Rising* books. And the Brenin Llwyd, the Grey King, blew his misty self into the title of the book, and to my great astonishment it won the Newbery Medal, and changed my life forever.

Looking back, I realize that a lot of my stories have been haunted by place – and by *hiraeth*. The mischievous shape-changing Boggart about whom I wrote a couple of books, he crossed the Atlantic by accident, and missed his ancient Scottish loch – a homesickness so powerful that it stopped all his happy mayhem and tugged him home, in the end. A few books after that, I wrote a time-shift fantasy called *Victory* in which a girl was transplanted from England to the United States and was – of course – desperately homesick. I’d made some progress by this time, because by the end of

the book she'd come to terms with it, and accepted that corny but accurate old truism that home is where the heart is.

And so have I. The book I've just finished, after four years work, is totally place-haunted, but the place, at last, is American. Six years ago, because my husband had died and I wanted to be closer to my children, I built a house on an almost-island in a saltmarsh, on the coast of Massachusetts. You get there across a causeway. At low tide the sea is way out on the horizon, but at very high tides it's only sixty feet from my windows, covering the causeway so that we are truly an island. There's no way in or out, unless you use a kayak.

(Kayaking over the causeway is really cool, because you can see the road surface three feet underneath you. It's like flying.)

The sky changes all the time, out there, and so does the quality of the light, and the color of the marsh. Sunrise and sunset are wonderful, tracking round the horizon as the year goes by; and so is moonrise, this gigantic yellow orb rising out of the sea.

The people who venerated all these things must have hunted on this marsh for thousands of years - until 1630, when the English arrived and decided that they owned America. Nobody actually lived on the island for three centuries after that, and then a family with small children built a little summer house there. When this house began falling down, one of the children, by then a very old lady, sold it to me. And I built my own house. Living there, looking out at the marsh and the sea, I was very soon haunted, continually, by the place and by its past time. I even dreamed about it

I kept thinking: What happened, out there, under those shifting skies, under the bright stars – what happened after those arrogant holier-than-thou white men invaded the land of the Native Americans, the American Indians? The First Nations, as they beautifully say in Canada.

I thought: Even the trees growing on my island now must be the descendants of the trees that grew here then, and the plants, the grasses, the animals, the baby lobsters and herring and crabs in the little creeks of the saltmarsh. I thought: Ask them, listen to them. What happened, in this place?

As you can tell, some pretty weird things can happen to your head if you live on your own on a saltmarsh island.

But the magic had got me. So for the next four years I lived in the place not just bodily, but in my head, writing a story that's now called *Ghost Hawk*. I wrote my book about the men and women and children who might have lived in the crucible that was this country back in the 17th century. About two boys, of different races, whose lives are disastrously affected by their people's assumptions about land, and liberty, and religion.

I think I may have come full circle. Subconsciously, the *Dark Is Rising* sequence tried to give its readers a sense of the dangers of extremism, whether in the service of evil or good, and so does this new book. But I don't write in order to teach. It was the *place* that drove this story, the place where I have my American roots and try unsuccessfully to forgive my English ancestors.

A writer at work spends a lot of time staring at the ceiling, or the floor, or just into space. We're not looking at anything, we aren't seeing anything; we're inside that place in our heads where the story's happening. It's like that nice image of the American author James Thurber, standing on the edge of a crowd at a cocktail party holding his glass, looking vacantly at nothing, and his wife comes up to him and says, "Thurber, stop *writing!*"

Those of us who are parents also remember the moment when you're sitting at the desk, visualizing some crucial action, utterly buried in the story – and your kid comes running into the room, and you say, "Not now, darling, Mummy's working." And then you see the expression on the child's face, that says, "Working? You're looking out the window!"

But when that child is reading a book, he too has left the world around him, he's inside the story. He – by which of course I also mean she – has found a magic place, of laughter or comfort or what you might call safe terror, to which he wants to come back again and again. That's why series books do so well, Jeff Kinney's *Wimpy Kid*, Rick Riordan's series, all the vampire stories, and so many others. The reading child finds a particular place she loves to go to, the first room in a whole house of stories, and she will keep on going to the house until she's discovered and lived in all its other rooms, one by one, and she – or he – will be distraught when there aren't any more.

Which is terrific, because it keeps them reading all through adolescence. When they've exhausted that house, with any luck they

go on up the street of story, to another big house full of rooms. Or maybe a duplex. Or even a modest cottage, visited by fewer people but perhaps quite remarkable.

The magic place that is a story isn't going to go away, even though we live in an age of screens that seem to grow more powerful the smaller they get. Ebooks may diminish the quantities of books on paper, but they're not going to drive them out. Our children may have developed prehensile thumbs, and texts and tweets may not be doing great things for the language, but the writer's imagination still needs words, intelligibly set out, to communicate with the imagination of the reader.

Story isn't in trouble, it just needs a little more help. Most of all, of course, it needs governments, at all levels, with the sense to fund libraries in cities and towns and schools..... don't get me started.

Books like the *Dark Is Rising* sequence have always needed and been given help, by people like you. The kid finishes the series, the last *Harry Potter*, and says to the librarian, "There aren't any more?"

And the librarian says, "Ah, but let me show you what *else* there is...."

Thank you to those who chose to honor the late Margaret Edwards, to her current very-much-alive committee, and to the benevolence of *School Library Journal*. Thank you to my late great editor and best friend, Margaret K. McElderry, without whom I wouldn't be standing here. And more than anything, my thanks to all of you, out there in the world of children's libraries and literature, for

so often opening a door and taking a child – or a young adult - into a magical place.